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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 004571

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SUBJECT: SERPA ON LIBERAL PARTY DYNAMICS AND UPCOMING
PRESIDENTIAL RACE

REF: BOGOTA 2216

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood, Reasons: 1.4 B & D.

11. (C) Summary: Poloff met with two-time presidential candidate Horacio Serpa on May 11. Serpa is resisting the move by former President Cesar Gaviria to take over the Liberal Party (PLC), believing the party would need to form a center-left alliance to effectively challenge President Uribe in the May 2006 presidential election. He said opposition parties would not face a level playing field in challenging Uribe in the elections, but stopped short of endorsing the call by some PLC members to not run a candidate against Uribe. Serpa criticized Uribe for a singular focus on public security at the expense of socioeconomic issues. End Summary.

12. (C) On May 11, poloff met with Horacio Serpa, the Liberal Party's 1998 and 2002 presidential candidate and immediate past GOC ambassador to the OAS. Regarding the upcoming PLC national convention in early June, Serpa continued to express reservations over a potential single party head in the person of former President and OAS SyG Cesar Gaviria. Serpa argued that the current PLC leadership scheme, a ten-member executive council with a rotating presidency, is more inclusive of PLC members, and allows greater participation by women, young adults, and Afro-Colombians. He also said a Gaviria party presidency would be dictatorial in nature and a step back from the PLC's recent campaign for greater openness and pluralism in the party.

13. (C) Serpa stated his belief that former Bogota mayor Enrique Penalosa and Senators Rafael Pardo and Rodrigo Rivera would enter the PLC's presidential nominee primary, ideally to take place in March 2006 on the same Sunday as Congressional elections (reftel). Serpa refused to confirm his own intentions regarding the primary. He did, however, stress that he had been talking to leaders of the major parties on the left -- the Democratic Pole (PDI) and Democratic Alternative (AD) -- about running a coalition left/center-left candidate against Uribe. Serpa admitted that Gaviria, Penalosa, Pardo, and Rivera, however, were all strongly in favor of a go-alone PLC candidate.

14. (C) Serpa lamented the state of play of reelection implementing legislation in the Congress and the impasse over associated draft rules (known locally as "garantias") for creating a level playing field for candidates competing in the upcoming presidential race. He criticized the GOC for treating the PLC and other left and center-left parties with disdain. He noted the proposal by some PLC members not to field a candidate against Uribe in the absence of a fair playing field, but stopped short of endorsing it -- for the time being.

15. (C) Serpa recognized public security advances under Uribe but lamented the lack of attention to social issues. He noted the critical state of the public education and public health systems. With regard to fighting the FARC, Serpa stated that much-touted military successes were exaggerated to enhance prospects for Uribe's reelection. He referred to recent FARC offenses -- most notably the siege of Toribio -- as evidence that the FARC threat is still alive and well.

16. (C) Comment: Serpa's comments aside, the vast majority of our Liberal Party contacts concur that the Gaviria PLC presidency is a done deal. A PLC-PDI-AD alliance for 2006 is unlikely, as the PDI and AD would resist Serpa as standard-bearer, and neither the PDI nor AD have a strong potential candidate. While the debate over campaign rules of the game continues, the PLC as a collective is not likely to sit out the 2006 contest. Serpa's own prospects for being the PLC nominee would be greatly strengthened were the Constitutional Court to rule that Uribe could not run.

WOOD